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ABSTRACT

While fear of crime is endemic to American society, certain individuals are more likely than others to express concern for their safety. Using data from the 1974 NORC General Survey (N=1,484), this study examines age and other demographic characteristics of respondents who answered affirmatively to the question "Is there any area around here, that is, within a mile, where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" The results show a positive relationship between age and fear; a significantly greater percentage ($p<.01$) of older respondents (60+) expressed this fear compared to middle aged (40-59) and younger (18-39) respondents. In addition, women are more likely than men to express fear ($p<.001$) and residents of urban areas express fear to a significantly greater extent ($p<.001$) than residents of other areas. In combination, the effects of age, sex, and residence are strong predictors: 85% of older, urban females expressed fear, whereas only 7% of younger, rural males indicated such concern for their safety. The implications of these findings for isolation among older, urban residents and for possible corrective measures (e.g., neighborhood escort services) are considered. (Author)

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FEAR OF ASSAULT AMONG THE ELDERLY

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Paper presented at the 1975 Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Louisville, Kentucky, October 29.

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FEAR OF ASSAULT AMONG THE ELDERLY

This study is an analysis of the differential distribution of fear by age and other demographic categories. While some contend that the incidence of crime is not increasing, there can be little doubt that its impact on people's lives is indeed increasing. Expanded media coverage of particularly violent crimes has had a profound effect on individuals' perceptions of their safety. This heightened awareness of crime has instilled fear in many people. It also follows that crimes threatening an individual's well-being (i.e., crimes against persons) cause the most apprehension. Along these lines, it is expected that women and the elderly, those segments of the population least able to defend themselves, will be most concerned for their safety and thus most susceptible to the fear of assault.

Although crime is a ubiquitous phenomenon, urban areas and particularly those areas with high concentrations of non-whites are characterized by the highest crime rates. Hence, fear should also be particularly prevalent among urban residents and among non-whites, since their residential patterns place them in these high crime areas.

Fear among the elderly has many implications. Not only are older persons denied peace of mind but also neighborhood mobility which in turn can lead to isolation. The streets are seen as a place where one is most vulnerable to an attack, therefore one avoids the streets. The home, be it a room, an apartment or a house becomes a haven, a sanctuary from the streets. In short, the elderly can become captives of their homes, since to venture out would be to risk their physical and even financial security. For example, in a study of the aged in a Philadelphia ghetto, Lawton and Kleban found that the elderly would never consider leaving their home in

the evenings. The study concluded:

> While these people are demonstrably deprived of income, health and meaningful time use, their spontaneous comments reveal how urgently they fear threats to their physical safety and how deeply this insecurity underlies their difficulty in gaining satisfaction in other areas.[1]

The thrust of these findings are reflected in Schooler's (1970) study, which demonstrated that environmental factors, i.e. unsafe streets, have a more profound effect on older people's morale than social relationships.[2] This is logical because environmental factors inhibit the natural development of social relationships. The stereotypic urban resident is characterized by distrust and suspicion not to mention fear, hardly traits that would either encourage social interaction or enhance the quality of his/her life. Central to the improvement of life satisfaction among the elderly is to realize that environmental factors, as well as the extent of social relationships, are important in determining the elderly's morale.

Using data from the 1974 NORC General Social Survey, this paper examines age and other demographic characteristics of respondents who answered affirmatively to the question, "Is there any area around here--that is, within a mile--where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" This survey was conducted in the Spring of 1974 by The National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago. It consists of interviews with a probability sample of 1,484 respondents. The respondents are a cross-section of persons 18 years and older living in non-institutionalized settings within the United States.

In addition to age, the other demographic variables considered in this paper are sex, race, and the size of the community in which the respondent resides. Respondent's age was recoded into three groupings: 18-39 years old, 40-59 years old and 60+ years old.

Community size was also divided into three categories: urban >50,000, suburbs-small city 50,000-9,999 and rural <9,999.

Crosstabulations of all four demographic variables with the dependent variable (is there any area around here...where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?) yielded statistically significant relationships with varying levels of strength.

Table 1 here

Data in Table 1 indicate that a greater percentage of older respondents (60+) compared to middle aged (40-59) and younger (18-39) respondents expressed fear of walking alone at night and that a greater proportion of non-whites expressed this fear. Moreover, there is a linear relationship between community size and fear: 59% of the urban respondents expressed fear* compared with 44% of the suburban and 29% of the rural respondents. A substantially greater percentage of female respondents expressed fear compared to male respondents.

Although all four bivariate relationships are statistically significant, there are some relationships that are considerably stronger than others. As the measures of association show, the stronger relationships are between fear and sex and fear and community size. In the bivariate analysis, the relationship between age and fear is the weakest.

In order to gain a more precise picture of the relationship between age and fear, multivariate analysis was introduced with first order controls for sex, race and community size.

Table 2 here

Table 2 indicates that when controlling for sex, a respondent's

*When fear is mentioned from now on it is meant fear of walking alone at night.

age affects the fear of both males and females. However, the relationship is stronger among the males. Female respondents, regardless of their age, express a great deal of fear. When controlling for age, the relationship between fear and sex persisted. Although the measures of association are all very high, it is interesting to note that the measures of association decrease as the age increases. This suggests that among the oldest respondents (60+), sex has less of an influence on fear.

Table 3 here

The relationship between age and fear was then examined with a control for community size. Under these conditions, the relationship between age and fear vanished among suburban and rural respondents. In other words, age affects fear only among urban respondents. In the event of a violent assault, one's physical agility is a prerequisite in thwarting or overcoming the attack. One's physical agility is generally predicated on one's age: younger people being stronger than older people. Given that the incidence of violent assaults is greatest in urban areas, one can understand the importance of an urban respondent's age in determining fear.

In Table 3, when controlling age, the relationship between community size and fear persists at all levels. However, the relationship emerges most strongly among the respondent 60+. This is further evidence that the urban milieu is a powerful determinant of an older person's fear.

Table 4 here

The final first order analysis examines the relationship between age and fear, controlling for the respondent's race. This relationship is represented in Table 4. The statistics indicate that age has a significant influence only among white respondents: as age increases the percentage of white respondents expressing

fear similarly increases. For non-whites, age is not a statistically significant variable. However, this is partly due to sample size. (Note the greater V for non-whites + a percentage difference between young and old respondents that is greater than the comparable percentage difference for white respondents.) Nevertheless, for all ages the majority of non-white respondents expressed fear.

When controlling for age, a respondent's race affects fear only among the younger (18-39) and middle aged (40-59) respondents. Among the elderly respondents (60+), race has no statistically significant influence on a respondent's fear of walking alone at night. In other words, the influence of race on fear which is evident among the young and middle aged respondents, vanishes among the respondents 60 years and older. Among these individuals, their age instead of their race is the prime cause of fear.

From the first order analyses, we can conclude then the urban respondent 60+ expressed fear of walking alone at night most frequently but that fear is also highly prevalent among older females and older non-whites. Second order controls have been placed on the relationship between age and fear in order to specify further the fearful respondent.

(Table 5 here)

Without going into great detail, the data in Table 5 show that only 7% of the younger males living in rural areas express fear as compared with 63% of the older urban males - a 56% difference. Only 41% of the younger, rural females express fear compared to 85%

of the older females living in urban areas - a 44% difference. In combination, then, we see that only 7% of the younger, rural males but 85% of the older females in urban areas express fear, in other words, a 78% difference.

When controlling for race and community size, the relationship between age and fear shows that 23% of the young, white respondents living in rural areas express fear as compared with 75% of the older, white respondents living in urban areas - a 52% difference. Among non-whites, the lowest percentage expressing fear was 46% for middle aged non-whites living in suburban areas, whereas the highest percentage was 76% for older non-whites living in urban areas - a 30% difference. In combination, only 23% of the young white respondents living in rural areas express fear compared to 76% of the older, non-white, urban respondent - a 53% difference.

When race and sex are controlled, the data representing the relationship between age and fear show that only 16% of the white males 18-39 years old express fear compared to 71% of the white females 60 years and older - a 55% difference. Among the non-whites, 31% of the male respondents 18-39 years old express fear compared to 76% of the female respondents 60 years and older - a 45% difference. In combination, then, the lowest incidence of fear is among white, male respondents 18-39 years old (16%) whereas the highest incidence of fear is among non-white, female respondents 60 years and older - a 60% difference.

This high level of fear among the elderly, particularly the older, urban female, has serious implications for the lifestyles of these individuals. Specifically, they can become "prisoners

in their own homes".[3] Since socializing and entertainment are endemic to later hours of the day, i.e. nighttime, and since frequently these activities involve venturing outside one's house or apartment, the elderly, because of their fear, can be deprived of these enjoyments. The minority of urban elderly, who can either afford a taxi or even feel safe using a taxi at night are an exception. However, in general, the mobility of the elderly is extremely limited. This limitation fosters isolation and is detrimental to the quality of life.

There is some debate concerning the rate of victimization of elderly people. Some say, "the greatest number of persons who are victims of crimes are age 55 and older."[4] While others contend that, "Survey data do not support the popular belief that the aged as a group are the greatest victims of crime in general; also, they do not repudiate the probability that old people may have a greater risk than other persons of being victimized of certain minor crimes."[5] Regardless of whether the elderly are indeed less likely to be victimized, this study demonstrates that a significant proportion of older people possess the fear ofvictimization or better stated, this fear possesses them. What must be realized is that this fear can affect behavior by drastically inhibiting physical mobility and social interaction, which are essential elements in the actualization of life satisfaction.

The total elimination of fear is an impossible task. One obvious way to decrease fear is to decrease the incidence of street crimes. Since crime in general is not on the wane, despite many

efforts to achieve this end, the second best solution is to provide the elderly, who are afraid to walk alone at night, with additional security. Certain alternatives suggest themselves e.g. specialized, demand-responsive transportation, increased street lighting, pedestrian alarm boxes, neighborhood buddy systems and police, community or protective dog escort services.

In any event, the image of an elderly person, who, due to circumstances beyond his/her control, is confined to the home after the sun goes down, is a depressing one. As anxieties dissolve and the elderly feel freer to venture out after dark, the quality of their lives can only improve.

Table 1: Percentage of Respondents Expressing Fear by Age, Race, Community, Size and Sex

	% Yes	(N)
Age:		
18-39	42	(660)
40-59	43	(474)
60+	53	(331)
	x2=11.73 df=2 p<.01 V=.09	
Race:		
White	43	(1,294)
Black	61	(170)
Other	43	(7)
	x2=18.86 df=2 p<.001 V=.11	
Community Size:		
Urban	59	(452)
Suburbs	44	(656)
Rural	29	(361)
	x2=69.71 df=2 p<.001 V=.22	
Sex:		
Male	24	(688)
Female	63	(783)
	x2=225.99 df=1 p<.001 phi=.40	

Table 2: Percent Expressing Fear by Age Controlling for Sex

Age	Male	(N)	Female	(N)		
18-39	18	(289)	61	(371)	x2=121.02 p<.001	df=1 phi=.43
40-59	23	(224)	61	(250)	x2=67.92 p<.001	df=1 phi=.38
60+	36	(173)	72	(158)	x2=42.29 p<.001	df=1 phi=.36
	x2=18.96 p<.001	df=2 V=.17	x2=6.71 p<.05	df=2 V=.09		

Table 3: Percent Expressing Fear by Age Controlling for Community Size

Age	Urban	(N)	Suburbs	(N)	Rural	(N)	
18-39	53	(230)	41	(294)	26	(136)	x2=26.35 df=2 p<.001 V=.20
40-59	54	(124)	44	(238)	31	(122)	x2=13.11 df=2 p<.01 V=.17
60+	75	(108)	51	(121)	32	(102)	x2=38.60 df=2 p<.001 V=.34
	x2=15.74 df=2 p .001 V=.19		x2=3.54 NS V=.07		x2=1.49 NS V=.06		

Table 4: Percent Expressing Fear by Age Controlling for Race

Age	White	(N)	Non-white	(N)	
18-39	40	(571)	55	(89)	x2=6.46 df=1 p<.02 phi=.10
40-59	41	(425)	61	(49)	x2=6.40 df=1 p<.02 phi=.12
60+	51	(293)	68	(38)	x2=3.35 NS phi=.10
	x2=10.56 df=2 p<.01 V=.09		x2=2.05 NS V=.11		

Table 5: Percent Expressing Fear by Age Controlling for Sex and Community Size

	Male				Female			
Age	urb.	sub.	rur.		Urb.	sub.	rur.	
18-39	27	17	7	x2=11.23 df=2	75	59	41	x2=23.35 df=2
(N)	(103)	(125)	(61)	p<.01 V=.20	(127)	(170)	(74)	p<.001 V=.25
40-59	31	22	18	x2=2.75 NS	80	65	41	x2=21.15 df=2
(N)	(59)	(114)	(51)	V=.11	(55)	(124)	(71)	p<.001 V=.29
60+	63	34	15	x2=27.01 df=2	85	71	56	x2=10.38 df=2
(N)	(49)	(65)	(59)	p<.001 V=.40	(59)	(56)	(43)	p<.01 V=.26
	x2=19.92 df=2 p<.001 V=.31	x2=7.18 df=2 p<.05 V=.15	x2=3.51 NS V=.14		x2=2.46 NS V=.10	x2=2.77 NS V=.09	x2=3.08 NS V=.13	

NOTES

1. M. Powell Lawton, Morton H. Kleban, "The Aged Resident of Inner City". GERONTOLOGIST (1971) p. 278.

2. Kermit Schooler, "Effect of Environment on Morale". GERONTOLOGIST, (1970) 10, p. 196.

3. Gary Lesnoff-Caravaglia, "Return of the Furies: Young Criminals Vs. Old Victims". (presented at the National Conference on Crime Against the Elderly, June 1975) p. 1.

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4. Jaber Gubrium, "Victimization in Old Age". CRIME AND DELINQUENCY (July 1974, vol. 20, no. 3) p. 246.

5. John Conklin, "Robbery, The Elderly and Fear: An Urban Problem in Search of a Solution". (presented at the National Conference on Crime Against the Elderly, June 1975) p. 10.

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